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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH EASES BAN ON TRADE UNION ACTIVITIES) LABOR SKEPTICAL.

Summary

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¶1. (U) The Government of Bangladesh (GOB) recently announced a partial relaxation of the ban on trade union activities in place under the State of Emergency since January 2007. The new measures allow union activities, but limit the size of gatherings and require advance permission in certain cases. NGOs remain dissatisfied with the government's actions, however, and call for a full lifting of the ban on trade union activities.

The devil is in the details

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¶2. (U) The Caretaker Government had banned all trade union activity as part of the general State of Emergency in effect since January 2007. Trade unions were prevented from performing basic functions including holding meetings, conducting internal elections and engaging in collective bargaining. On September 7th, the GOB announced a partial relaxation of the ban. The new rules limit the size of any meeting to no more than 500 people and require 48 hours notice to authorities if the gathering is to be larger than 100 people. The rules also stipulate that meetings can only be held indoors and that no live broadcast of the proceedings on television or radio will be permitted. Moreover, no political discussions will be allowed; individuals will only be allowed to discuss labor-related matters.

¶3. (U) In meetings with the Ministry of Labor, officials said the ban was relaxed so trade unions could carry out administrative tasks and fulfill certain financial obligations. Labor officials expressed the hope that the ban would be relaxed further after national elections in December. They agreed there was a need for constructive trade union activity in Bangladesh.

Confusion and skepticism reign

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¶4. (SBU) Workers, rights groups remain deeply skeptical that this action will benefit workers in the long run. Labor activists called for an end to the State of Emergency and a lifting of all restrictions on union activities. The Country Director of the American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), the international development arm of the AFL-CIO, reported that NGOs had not yet been able to obtain a copy of the official notice announcing the new rules on union activity and there was much confusion about the details of the regulations. He noted that the GOB had allowed elections that would permit workers to decide which unions can collectively bargain with employers, but it was not yet clear if the new regulations permitted elections to select union leadership. He added that there were still bans on negotiation with management and on the formation of new trade unions.

Comment

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15. (SBU) It remains to be seen what the full impact of these new measures will be on workers. Organized labor is correct in pointing out that these are only interim steps and more action is necessary if full rights of association are to be restored. For its part, the Caretaker Government undoubtedly remains concerned that trade unions could be used by the political parties to advance their goals and foment civil unrest, a common occurrence in Bangladesh's history. Post will continue to urge the GOB to support constructive endeavors to protect the rights of workers, including a full lifting of the ban on trade union activities.

Moriarty